

## Vilseck High School Information Sheet

Viral meningitis has been diagnosed in Bavaria, however, it is common this time of year. Viral meningitis is very different from bacterial meningitis. It is usually less severe and resolves without specific treatment. Most patients recover completely on their own. If you are around someone who has viral meningitis, you have a very small chance of developing meningitis. Anyone who has a high fever, headache, and stiff neck should be evaluated by a healthcare provider.

## Viral ("Aseptic") Meningitis FAQs

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Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. People sometimes refer to it as *spinal meningitis*.

**What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis?** High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take 1 to 2 days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness. In newborns and small infants, the classic symptoms of fever, headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to detect, and the infant may only appear slow or inactive, or be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures.

**Is it Viral or Bacterial?** Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important because the severity of illness and the treatment differ. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without specific treatment, while bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disability. It also is important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people.

**Is viral meningitis a serious disease?** Viral ("aseptic") meningitis is serious but rarely fatal in persons with normal immune systems. Usually, the symptoms last from 7 to 10 days and the patient recovers completely. Bacterial meningitis, on the other hand, can be very serious and result in disability or death if not treated promptly. Often, the symptoms of viral meningitis and bacterial meningitis are the same. For this reason, if you think you or your child has meningitis, see your doctor as soon as possible.

**How is viral meningitis diagnosed?** Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. Viral meningitis is usually diagnosed by laboratory tests of spinal fluid obtained with a spinal tap. The spinal fluid is obtained by performing a spinal tap, in which a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back where fluid in the spinal canal is readily accessible. The specific cause of viral meningitis can be determined by tests that identify the virus in specimens collected from the patient, but these tests are rarely done.

**What causes viral meningitis?** Many different viruses can cause meningitis. About 90% of cases of viral meningitis are caused by members of a group of viruses known as enteroviruses, such as coxsackieviruses and echoviruses. These viruses are more common during summer and fall months. Herpesviruses and the mumps virus can also cause viral meningitis.

**How is viral meningitis treated?** No specific treatment for viral meningitis exists at this time. Most patients completely recover on their own. Doctors often will recommend bed rest, plenty of fluids, and medicine to relieve fever and headache.

**How is the virus spread?** Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are most often spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions (e.g., saliva, sputum, or nasal mucus) of an infected person. This usually happens by shaking hands with an infected person or touching something they have handled, and then rubbing your own nose or mouth. The incubation period for enteroviruses is usually between 3 and 7 days from the time you are infected until you develop symptoms. You can usually spread the virus to someone else beginning about 3 days after you are infected until about 10 days after you develop symptoms.

**Can I get viral meningitis if I'm around someone who has it?** The viruses that cause viral meningitis are contagious. Enteroviruses, for example, are very common during the summer and early fall, and many people are exposed to them. However, most infected persons either have no symptoms or develop only a cold or rash with low-grade fever. Only a small proportion of infected persons actually develop meningitis. Therefore, if you are around someone who has viral meningitis, you have a moderate chance of becoming infected with the virus that caused it, but a very small chance of developing meningitis.

**How can I reduce my chances of becoming infected?** Because most persons who are infected with enteroviruses do not become sick, it can be difficult to prevent the spread of the virus. However, adhering to good personal hygiene can help to reduce your chances of becoming infected. If you are in contact with someone who has viral meningitis, the most effective method of prevention is to wash your hands thoroughly and often (see "Handwashing" in: [An Ounce of Prevention: Keeps the Germs Away](#)). Also, cleaning contaminated surfaces and soiled articles first with soap and water, and then disinfecting them with a dilute solution of chlorine-containing bleach (made by mixing approximately ¼ cup of bleach with 1 gallon of water) can be a very effective way to inactivate the virus, especially in institutional settings such as child care centers.

**Source:** CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/viral/viral-faqs.htm>

If you have any questions, please contact your public health nurse:

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